

JAMES C. YOUNG  
"J. P." OF THE NEW <sup>York</sup> WORLD

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# PERSONALITY

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“J. P.” of the New York World

*A Genius of Journalism who Fought against  
Odds and Conquered Even Blindness*

by JAMES C. YOUNG

ON A night in August of 1864 a steamship loomed out of the Atlantic, casting anchor off Boston harbor. Two figures hung over her rail, watching the lights of this strange, new land on the lee bow. It was a place of mystery, marked only by those winking eyes, the continent they were yet to discover. What would they find there—home, opportunity, fortune?

The men at the rail were doubtful. They murmured together, shaking troubled heads. Tomorrow would be a day of destiny. The Civil War had entered its last phase and Federal armies needed recruits badly. Here were two of them, enlisted in Europe as “immigrants,” but soon to be carrying muskets on Virginia battlefields.

Possibly they had thought better about soldiering. In Europe the war seemed far away; now it was just beyond those lights. Tomorrow the die would be cast, only

the night was theirs. Like bold men, they took this slender portion from Fortune's hand, dropping overboard to swim for liberty. Some minutes later a pair of dripping figures crawled ashore. One of them was Joseph Pulitzer, founder of the New York *World*. Surely it was a night of the Fates; the United States had gained a citizen who was to have as large a part in shaping its course as any man of his generation.

His mother was a Christian and his father a Jew. He had tried to join most of the worth while armies in Europe, and each had rejected him. Soldiering attracted his interest because it was the only thing open to a penniless young man. First he had sought to join the Austrian army at his native town in Hungary. Then he had gone to Paris and offered himself for the Foreign Legion. Bad eyes and a cough were poor recommendations. So he moved on to London and would have taken the



Queen's shilling for service in India. Again his faults found him out.

Thus the young man came to Hamburg, this time trying to ship as a sailor. But he certainly would not do for a life before the mast. The skippers who looked at him were definite about that. Hardly another young man in Europe was so down on his luck. More than once he turned a half wistful glance to the town in Hungary that he had left to go adventuring. Each time the smiles of neighbors met his fancy. Anything but that—and right there the American recruiting agent caught him in his net. Not much of a catch, as men went; yet they died fast on Virginia battlefields. One weakling more or less made little difference. As for Joseph Pulitzer, he at last had found an army that would take him; small wonder he should sign joyfully and sail eagerly.

The promised land did not even suspect that he had reached its shores. Then, as now, every incoming ship was watched for runaways. Occasionally one scrambles overboard at Quarantine and swims to liberty, but more often he falls into official hands—Ellis Island—deportation. Something a great deal more unpleasant would have been likely to await Joseph Pulitzer had this not been a night of the Fates. He landed safely.

AND a few days later he reached New York, hardly knowing a word of English; a spare young man with sharp, protruding chin, rather weak blue eyes and a somewhat handsome brow, had anybody been interested to look at it. No one gave him the least attention. He was broke, bedraggled, down at the heel. Off and on he had a cough. His hair was more red than brown. Taken by and large, he must have been about as seedy a foreigner as New York ever received.

Not many hours after his arrival a recruiting agent carefully blotted the new man's signature and sent him to join the First New York Lincoln Cavalry. For six months he saw no little service. But July of 1865 found him back in New York, mustered out, soon broke again. The city

was full of returned soldiers. A weakly foreigner, speaking impossible English, met anything but a welcome. Returned soldiers were not especially popular. Stay-at-home citizens said that they made the city disorderly; such rough-looking fellows, too, and so many of them! What could the country do with its disbanded host?

FOR the time being Joseph Pulitzer could do nothing better than loiter about City Hall Park, as many a man before and after him, taking account of his start in the new land. Evidently its biggest city was no place to get on. Where could he go? By preference to some place where German was unknown and ex-soldiers were not too plentiful. He never would learn the language otherwise. Then a joker suggested St. Louis, knowing it to be largely German.

How he got to St. Louis is a matter never related, but doubtless by freight train and foot. St. Louis not only was largely German, it was full of returned soldiers. Work could scarcely be had, but work he did, alongside of negro stevedores on the quays. He was hostler in a stable for mules, a laborer as chance offered. Any employment proved transitory. St. Louis, in the shadow of war, held much of hardship. Pulitzer and fifty more like him scraped together \$5 each for an agent who promised steady work down the river. And that night he again cast off for unknown parts, on a river steamboat. Toward morning the men were ordered out, down the gangplank and onto land. Before they could look around the steamboat pulled away, leaving them to fury in a wilderness.

It was three days before that little band trudged back to St. Louis, hungry, footsore, desperate—carrying a rope. Meanwhile the agent had decamped. But Fortune was about to smile upon this sorely tried son of hers. The city's numerous German press always stood between those of German origin and aggressions far or near. A reporter for the *Westliche Post* came up with Pulitzer and heard his



but a man burned by the Pulitzer fever would have braved it. The New York *Herald* stood at the pinnacle of American journalism—a precedence admitted not only by the world at large but the *Herald* as well, conservative, pretentious, a little smug and satisfied to be rated the nation's greatest newspaper. The *Sun*, Dana's fine old paper, was declining, but still scholarly, influential, somewhat like an elderly gentleman in a silk hat. The *Tribune* was a joint reflection of the other two, struggling to overcome Greeley's defeat. The *Times* had not yet emerged from the middle ages of journalism. The *Star* represented low-browed politics of the Tammany brand. *Truth* and the *Morning Journal* were nondescript one-cent papers. There remained one other, the *World*, owned by Jay Gould, steadily losing capital and prestige. New York in 1883 had more morning papers than it has today; the flame of competition was at its hottest.

The man bold enough to venture into such a field needed courage indeed. What could he possibly offer the newspaper public that it did not already have? Yet Pulitzer ventured, buying the *World* for \$346,000, a price that frightened him after he agreed to it.

ON May 11, 1883, the new helmsman took over his charge. Metropolitan journalism considered him a little cynically. The eastern citadel never has looked kindly upon the western brother. It saw in the invader another of those blustery fellows from the wide open spaces. And it would as willingly have closed the door. Pulitzer's first efforts fitted in very well with New York's estimate. The *World* changed from dull respectability to a kind of journalism that its aloof neighbors considered distinctly shady.

Before Pulitzer came to New York the city had known two brands of newspapers, speaking broadly, best represented by the *Sun* and the *Star*. He introduced a third element, embodying in his energy and principles the new journalism. Competitors were soon to find that it was hardly shady, but decidedly uncomfortable. It

was hammer and tongs journalism, hitting vested interests, society, privilege in every form. Nobody could doubt its democracy. What had been appraised as shady sensationalism was shown to be a new element of many parts. The old time journal attacked with fury and defended with declamation. Its thinking was in simple terms and plain grooves. But Pulitzer brought with him from the West a weapon that he had already tried to good purpose, one that he was to temper in the brighter flame until its cutting edge became a master blade.

SCARCELY a man before him had attempted satire in journalism. Even the great Greeley did no more than gesture in that direction and the subtle Dana's pen paused this side. Now Pulitzer began to deride, to mock, to make faces and laugh. Others before him had stormed against the walls of privilege; he taught New York to smile at some of its demigods. Sallies against the hypocrisies of the rich, mockery of the politically entrenched, brought to the *World* a widening circle of readers. In three months its circulation went from 22,000 to 39,000.

That meant a great deal. Circulations were limited in those days and none of the papers had more than ten pages. The old journalism might be said to have died with the birth of the new *World*. The city liked it, or a large part of the city. New York, of all the great communities inhabited by man, is quick to sense sincerity and swift to respond. The city decided that here was a new sort of journal. It had life, vigor, courage. And, perhaps best of all, it knew how to make faces at the lords of creation.

The new paper exactly reflected the man who owned, directed, and largely edited it. For the first time he had the clay in his hands to model a work worthy of his hopes. Who could comprehend a little of the joy in which he lived? Every man who begins at the bottom and gets to the top feels the glow of pride in its most exquisite blush when he finds himself recognized, looked at with respect, even a



story, such a moving account of the sorry deed that the *Post's* man induced him to write it, sensing the value of the personal narrative. This account went to the *Post's* editor and brought Joseph Pulitzer one of the surprises of his life. Would he like to be a reporter for the German daily? He would have liked to be almost anything about that time, offering a prospect of bed and board.

The story of this frail young man's early years in St. Louis is one never to be fully written because nobody but himself knew the vivid whole.

RECENT conversations with practically every man of the surviving group that once surrounded the famous "J.P." have made it possible to piece out his story in part. From their recollections, repeating the words of the great journalist, come glimpses of the time when he held two jobs, eight hours a day, eight hours a night, leaving four to study the new tongue and four to sleep.

Back in Hungary the family had been well to do before his father died. As a boy he studied music, the classics and many other things. Now he worked incessantly to make this knowledge of some account. And in journalism he had found his *métier*. It lifted him into the Missouri Legislature, where he was capital correspondent of his paper. The two jobs did not mix well in the eyes of his fellows and one of them pointed out rather emphatically that he was a liar about matters contained in his dispatches. The affair ended by J.P. shooting his critic in the leg and getting soundly clubbed with a pistol butt.

About this time Horace Greeley stood forth as the hope of the liberal Republicans, opposed to Grant's second nomination. The editor failed to prevail against the warrior, as Pulitzer might have foreseen. But his zeal led him far in this campaign, so far that he renounced the party, shifting his allegiance to the party of Thomas Jefferson, first and greatest of his political gods.

The *Westliche Post* also suffered in the

campaign, since defeat is costly to a newspaper. J.P. sold out, receiving \$30,000 as his share. No mean achievement at twenty-five, for a youth who swam ashore eight years before. This pennon hanging on his lance, he gaily departed to the far away town in Hungary where family and neighbors met him astounded. Already he had begun to cultivate the rather stubbly reddish beard that afterward concealed his chin. No one ever appraised him as handsome, but the town folk in Hungary saw what others had noted before. He had a fine brow, a commanding eye. Achievement gave him the habit, the look of power. More than these things, he had intelligence in his eye; his presence radiated the vigor and enterprise so truly a part of the man's character.

By 1875 he was back in St. Louis, after several experiments in the East, and glad to buy the broken down *Dispatch*, an English paper. Next he combined it with another afternoon paper, and the *Post-Dispatch* was born. Those were the indefatigable years. J.P. got full control. He was manager, editor, leader writer, and mechanical expert. The stubbly beard achieved a fuller growth; the blue eyes peered a little more intensely from their gold-rimmed spectacles. He was thinner than ever, hard pressed, the cough bothered him at times.

NEWSBOYS and reporters, the policeman on his beat, milkmen and ordinary folk, might know when his day's work was ended. Then, and then only, did a flaring gas jet disappear, high up in one corner of the plant. So long as that jet burned J.P. bent over proofs, copy, editorials. Associates say that he tried to read every line, before and after printing. He was everywhere, saw everything, foresaw much. At twenty-five he owned a journal rated among the best in America. Moreover, he had acquired riches, or relative riches. But the flame of his ambition burned higher than ever.

Once more he looked toward New York. The morning newspaper field of 1883 was a closed corporation. Nobody



little fear. All of this Joseph Pulitzer must have known. But the man's rock bottom principle was liberty; his urgent motive justice. He had no patience to brook pretense. Wherever privilege appeared, there was Pulitzer, ready to scotch it.

The newspaper field of 1883 that had looked so formidable, despite its evident faults, in reality proved weak at all points. By the summer of 1884 competitors began to cut their prices, first the *Times*, then the *Herald* and next the *Tribune*. The *Herald* raised advertising rates sharply, by way of scorning the hybrid competitor, only to see much of its advertising appear in that competitor's columns. Pulitzer boldly announced that he would print more pages on Sunday than the *Herald*, and introduced a four-page sheet with the usual eight, thus creating a familiar institution of today—the Sunday supplement.

He remarked afterward that his competitors really presented him the city. Certainly they left little undone that would help him. And the Fates themselves had arranged that he should enter New York journalism at the moment of Democracy's greatest opportunity.

NOT since 1857 had the party elected a President. Four years before Pulitzer's advent in New York Samuel J. Tilden lost the office by one electoral vote and for a while it looked as though civil strife might result. Now it was Grover Cleveland's chance. Pulitzer pointed to him as the highest type of the Democrat, advocated his nomination until the party could not do otherwise, and campaigned for him so well that he entered the White House in 1885.

These were the ripening years of an astonishing career. Pulitzer came early to the office and remained so late that it used to be said he let the night watchman out in the mornings. Through these long hours he was the restless, irrepressible, anxious man that his staff came to know so well. That staff respected him almost to the point of veneration. It feared him

no little—not his wrath, but the keenness of his perceptions, the possibility that it would not measure up to J.P.'s expectations. Seldom has any leader been served so loyally. He was conscious of this zeal and took pride in it.

"The boys in the office have no friend but me," he used to say, and then remark that Napoleon, a favorite of his, knew how to inspire men and reward them well, but not how to make them love him. J. P. was well loved and mightily feared.

THAT combination of emotions served to gather around him a group of men who have had few rivals in latter day journalism. One or two of them have equalled and probably far excelled the famous editors of other days. And twenty of them have been men of the first rank.

The year 1887 brought a local political campaign of the hottest kind and J.P. emerged a loser. The defeat hurt his pride. Tammany turned back the *World's* candidate, De Lancey Nicoll, and put its own man in the District Attorney's office. J.P. saw some of his dearest principles rejected by a callous electorate. He looked about him wearily in mind, body, and zeal. At forty he had achieved more than falls to the run of men in a long life. And few men ever burned their candles faster. The tragical story is easily told. His eyes had troubled him a long time. Now he had to give them a rest—no papers—no books—a change of mental habits that tortured him. He stayed away from the office the winter of 1888, then prepared for a trip around the world. But the end of the next year found him sightless, the worst conceivable punishment for such a man. He never saw the new home of the *World*, one of his ambitions, and entered the building but three times after turning over control. Only four brief years had been granted him for prodigious labors. He was to spend the next twenty-four in darkness and relative inactivity—this man who had so aspired to grasp the torch that he might ceaselessly labor.

Yet the story of those twenty-four



years is the most remarkable phase of his life. No figure of history ever was more afflicted or strived to better purpose against such a difficulty. But in the end he mastered a method of his own to see, hear and walk with the eyes of others. By degrees the extinguished light burned anew for him. He resumed his supervision, if not direction of the *World*.

Perhaps no institution of equal rank ever has been administered in the same way. J.P. left lieutenants in charge—in fact, two lieutenants to every job—and depended upon their reports, coupled to his own instincts, for guidance.

**I**N THE steam yacht *Liberty* J.P. cruised many seas. Once he had reconciled his mind to its restrictions, he fared better, creating a world of his own. The faculty for choosing men that had gone far to make the *World* now enabled him to choose other men for his companions. Usually the yacht's company included six secretaries. And no group of men ever had a more delicate task.

Naturally affairs at the office were his first interest, then political matters and affairs of state. He gave attention to business, he had readers always at hand to take up his spare moments. From his waking hour until he retired there was not a wasted instant. Life went on much as it had done through his eventful years. Wherever the *Liberty* touched J.P. dispatched instructions, criticism. Heavy packets of mail carried more of the same kind. If he had been a careful reader in other days, he now became an exacting one. The moment mail bags were opened on the *Liberty* he was ready for a secretary to begin reading. "Take the *World* first," he would say, and the reading began at the oldest number, column by column.

But not without comment from J.P. Sitting in his deck chair, a broad felt hat shading his eyes, he would listen, knitting his long, nervous fingers. While the secretary read, J. P.'s comments ran on. One moment he would say, "Excellent, cable my compliments on that story," and the

next, "Terrible—stop—stop—a terrible story." A good headline earned a cabled promotion for many a man.

While the *Liberty* cruised from port to port, usually following the course of her master's whim, he kept abreast of events. The *World* never sufficed to appease his interest. The principal American and British journals had to be combed for matters worth the *World's* attention and afterward the Continental journals. Each secretary had a pocket filled with clippings for any emergency. When news and comment palled, J.P. took up discussion of the drama, literature, music. His eager mental habits gave him a store of knowledge that seemed to include everything. If a secretary went ashore for the day he was expected to tell something about his trip; no casual word or two, but a detailed description. Or if a man had read a book J.P. wanted to know exactly what was in it.

Among all the men who had helped to make modern America, Joseph Pulitzer was a figure scarcely equalled. His early difficulties, his always doubtful health, intensified his efforts. Like every other man he wanted to succeed for the sake of benefits to himself; but his passion for liberty, justice, opportunity was deeper and stronger than any other motive.

**J**UST as his achievements were monumental, so his influence has been wide and enduring. Curiously enough, one of his last and fondest hopes has fallen short of realization in the opinion of men close to him. The Pulitzer School of Journalism, a formal academic establishment, is considered to be something short of the institution that J.P. planned. He foresaw the college-trained, prepared journalist, enjoying the privileges of a recognized profession. Throughout his life he was on the lookout for "better men" and the school of journalism held promise of meeting his hopes. But the newspaper world still finds that the ablest newspaper men are trained right where J.P. learned himself. No doubt he would have liked to discuss that point.



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